H. L. MENCKEN, POETRY HATER

BY MAYO DUBASKY

An old myth which has prevailed since the late 1920s contends that H. L. Mencken was a poetry hater and didn't know anything about poetry. It is not likely that we will ever know how this point of view originated—whether it was propagated by a disgruntled poet whose nose had been whacked by Mencken, a new-thought pedagogue impatient for public confrontation, or the gang of liberals who set out to bury that reactionary s.o.b., H. L. Mencken. Just recently I read somewhere that Mencken had written to William Carlos Williams for *advice* on poetry while he was rewriting *The American Language,* which provides evidence that the myth persists.

In order to gain a logical perspective on this issue, let us compare what H. L. Mencken actually wrote with statements from some outstanding literary folk. His two best known essays are "The Poet and His

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Art" and "The New Poetry,"[1] both written in the Twenties and reprinted in the *Chrestomathy.* In the first essay Mencken begins with "Poetry is two quite distinct things and may be either or both. One is a series of words that are intrinsically musical, in clang-tint and rhythm, as the single words *cellar-door* and *sarcoma* are musical. The other is a series of ideas, false in themselves, that offer a means of escape from the harsh realities of everyday. In brief, poetry is a comforting piece of fiction set to more or less lascivious music."

The first premise is not illogical. Roget, in his *Thesaurus,* under *poetry,* has *song, tuneful, lullaby.* V. Gordon Childe wrote, "Poetry in which a fixed metrical structure combines with sweet-sounding words to embody beautiful ideas seems particularly Indo-European."[2] Mention may be made of Horace, Wilde and Poe who held that premise to be inviolate, Carlyle's eloquent "inward harmony of coherence,"[3] and Alexander Pope's luscious lines:

> "Music resembles poetry, in each / Are nameless graces which no methods teach / And a master hand alone can reach."[4]

Finally, Arthur Symons, who educated the English in *vers libre,* agreed that "The great things in poetry are song at the core."[5]

Mencken's second argument that poetry is an attitude of self delusion or fact denying is so commonplace that not even a right thinker would take offense at it. Some 1,420 years ago Pericles, the anarch of Athens, voiced that opinion, "Far from needing a Homer for our panegyrist, or others of his craft whose verses might charm for the moment, only for the impression which they gave to melt at the touch of fact. . ."[6] If Athenians are too anachronistic for our inquiry we have John Donne, a poet who touched on this fact in his letters, and Sir Walter Scott who said, "In poetry is always fallacy, and sometimes fiction."[7] Schopenhauer, who adored Goethe, averred, "Even distorted and false ideas gain an appearance of truth through versification."[8] The English critic I. A. Richards set forth this view in a mid-Twenties publication, "the bulk of poetry consists of statements which only the very foolish would think of attempting to verify."[9] To conclude with our witnesses, let us hear what George Santayana had to say on the subject: "Lying is a privilege of poets because they have not yet reached the level on which truth and error are discernible. . . . to have to distinguish fact from fancy is so great a violence to the inner man that not only poets but theologians and philosophers still protest against such a distinction."[10]

"The New Poetry," Mencken's other essay in the *Chrestomathy,* contains one idea that may have waved a red flag at poetizers, "Poetry can never be concocted by any purely intellectual process." Fuddyduddy professor Will Durant agreed, "Poetry dies at the touch of the mechanical," was his gentle admonishment. Mencken was contemptuous of posturers and atomizers who try "to make some abysmal literary legerdemain of poetry. His criticism repeated the conviction again and again. "This disparity between aspiration and equipment runs through the whole of American life; material prosperity and pub-

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[1] THE POET AND HIS ART: *Prejudices: Third Series.* Knopf, 1922; THE NEW POETRY; *Prejudices: Sixth Series.* Knopf, 1927. Both in *A Mencken Chrestomathy.* Knopf, 1949. Random House reprint 1982.

[2] THE ARYANS, A STUDY OF INDO-EUROPEAN ORIGINS: V. Gordon Childe. 1924. Dorset Press History of Civilization Series, 1987.

[3] ON HEROS, HERO WORSHIP AND THE HEROIC: Thomas Carlyle. 1897. Arno Press reprint, 1974.

[4] AN ESSAY ON CRITICISM: Alexander Pope. 1711. In *Norton Anthology of English Literature,* 1974.

[5] DRAMATIS PERSONAE: Arthur William Symons. Bobbs Merrill, 1923.

[6] PANEGYRIC TO THE HEROS OF ATHENS: Pericles. In *Thucydides' History.*

[7] THE BRIDE OF LAMMERMOOR: Sir Walter Scott. *Waverly Novels,* 1829-1833.

[8] ON THE AESTHETICS OF POETRY: Arthur Schopenhauer. In *The World as Will and Representation,* v. II. The Falcon Wing Press, 1958.

[9] PRINCIPALS OF LITERARY CRITICIASM: I(vor) A(rmstrong) Richards. Harcourt-Brace, 1925.

[10] LITTLE ESSAYS OF GEORGE SANTAYANA: Selected by Logan Pearsall Smith. Unwin, 1920. Dover reprint, 1967.

lic education have made it a sort of national disease." And again, "Poetry has become a recreation among us for the intellectually unemployed and unemployable."[12] Diderot, the great French encyclopedist, addressed the point with this estimate, "The spirit which moves and enlivens every syllable is the spirit of genius, and no effort can imitate this greatest gift of nature."[13] Mencken's warning that poetry cannot be reduced to a scientific formula was voiced by Louise Nevelson in her caution to the feminists, "The basic work of creation is emotional and reflects the depths of humanity."[14] And Dag Hammarskjold echoed this belief with "A poem is like a deed in that it is to be judged as a manifestation of the personality of its maker."[15]

The *Smart Set* articles and reviews provide numerous comments on the making of poetry, the beauty of Anglo-Saxon monosyllables, Mencken's interest in blank verse, the poets he would choose for a funeral service. We find his preference for "delicate and fragile" things in poetry and his admiration for the reticence of the Chinese poets, his suggestion that much verse that gets printed is lacking in ideas, that Masters' honesty was "probably deleterious to poetry." His seemingly irreverent statement that Shakespeare was often run aground and fell into old platitudes finds mutual understanding in Jorge Luis Borges, who stated, "Shakespeare's letting you down all the time. A very uneven writer. ... you have a very fine line, and then you have, well, rhetoric."[16] Mencken's appreciation of the King James Bible and praise for the "Song of Solomon" may well have offended contemporary writers, but Wilfred Scawen Blunt, an English gentleman-diplomat-writer who married the granddaughter of Lord Byron agreed, as this eulogy shows: "It is the first of all the love poems in the world, and I would sooner have written it than the whole of the rest of literature."[17] To continue the argument there is the Mencken declaration that the *Divine Comedy was* comedy which drew tart responses from the professoriat. To go to the classics for the opinion of a real professor, Jacob Burkhardt, the Swiss historian, we find "For with the Fourteenth Century comes Dante, who, in the utterance of scorn, leaves all other poets in the world far behind, and who, if only for the account of his great picture of the deceivers, must be called the chief master of colossal comedy."[18] A century later Ben Belitt, a current intellectual, now writes: "The premise of the Book of Job is essentially a comic one, as it was for that other agonist of self loss, Dante Aligheri."[19] Mencken's pronouncement that poetry declines as civilization advances and that poetry is a manifestation of youth finds concurrence with philosophers. Plato would not admit poets into his Republic. Santayana agrees that poets are immature and that old cynic Shopenhauer said: "The gift of poetry really flourishes in youth; also in youth susceptibility to poetry is often passionate. The young man delights in verses as such, and is often satisfied with modest wares. This tendency gradually diminishes with the years, and in old age prose is preferred."[20] Heidegger completes the theme with, "Poetry never takes language as a raw material ready at hand, rather it is poetry which makes language possible. Poetry is the primitive language of a historical people.[21]

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[12] THE FRINGES OF LOVELY LETTERS: *Prejudices: Fifth Series*. Knopf, 1926.

[13] LETTRE: Denis Diderot. In *In Hieroglyphics, The History of a Literary Symbol;* Liselotte Dieckmann. Washington U. Press, 1970.

[14] STATEMENT ON ART: Louise Nevelson. Art News, v. 69, No. 9, 1971.

[15] MARKINGS: Dag Hammerskjold, foreword by W.H. Auden. Knopf, 1964.

[16] INTERVIEW OF JORGE LUIS BORGES: Mark Childress & Charles C. McNair, Jr. *Saturday Review*, March, 1983.

[17] MY DIARIES: Wilfred Scawen Blunt, pref. by Lady Gregory. Knopf, 1920. Octagon reprint, 1980. Item dated 1907.

[18] THE CIVILIZATION OF THE RENAISSANCE IN ITALY: Jacob Burkhardt. 1860. Octagon reprint, 1954.

[19] LITERATURE AND BELIEF: Ben Belitt. Salmagundi Quarterly. v. 72, 5,20. Fall, 1986.

[20] ON THE AESTHETICS OF POETRY: see #8.

[21] HÖLDERLIN AND THE ESSENCE OF POETRY: Martin Heidegger. 1936. trans. Douglas Scott in *Existence and Being*, ed. Warner Brock. Henry Regnery, 1949.

It seems that H. L. Mencken has not really said anything about poetry that hasn't been stated by other, more exalted writers. But there is one more inquiry necessary to help us understand the embarrassment that seems to pervade his association with poetry. Mencken well knew the hypothesis that America loves poetry and that poets are nurtured for the greater good has not been true since the New England poets died out. The fact that poets have to pay for their own publications admits their being an economic hazard to publishers. William Stanley Braithwaite, the great Howard University poet and critic, noted that fact of life in his prophecy "... audiences will diminish and the consequent discouragement of the poets themselves will produce decline in creativeness. ...under dispensation of modern democracy ...poetry must make good business to flourish as an art."[22] Mencken summed it all with "poetry moves toward scholarliness and emptiness."[23] We Americans pay lip service to poetry but rarely read it; quotations are garnered for the "endless memorial services on Capitol Hill," for commencement addresses and speeches by politicians. That brash, crossroads America was too diverse, with strongly clashing tastes, to create a literature of poetry. The pace of getting ahead in that post-war U.S.A., at last a dues-paying member of the sodality of super nations, was moving toward *progress*. Competing for the leisure time and spare change of the public was an exciting array of time-killing devices: movies, radio, phonograph, dance bands, amusement parks, speakeasies, baseball, sporting events, the air show and the ubiquitous automobile. America was on the move again, this time not for homesteads but for pleasure and profit.

This public-getting-ahead was assiduously literate, they read best sellers, magazines and newspapers. Both the latter carried installments of the latest novels and satirical verses penned by clever newspaper poets. Serious poetry was relegated to the lovelorn and textbooks. The American Babbitts, having never known Markham, Robinson, Jeffers, Frost or James Weldon Johnson had no difficulty reciting *Smiles, Trees, April Showers, Annie Laurie,* because they had been set to music. When the poets hung up their harps and wrote for the eye alone they doomed their works for burial in vaults of cultural artifacts — unknown, unsung. They were supplanted by jinglers who sang their measures and found an audience anxious for their wares. This is the paradox of the American psyche that has gone unnoticed by the scholars and critics — on the one hand the national centers for the arts and culture with a "distillation of pedagogic doctrine and travelling academics," while on the other side we see the great public displaying a devotion to their Minnesingers that would gladden a Josquin or a Campion.

The play of chance as it is subtly revealed in literature was an element much to the taste of Mencken, but to modify that element to the poetry singing society before his view was impossible for him because of his musical bias. He regarded popular music as a stimulus for barbaric, wriggling dances. His awareness of the two-step as an American idiom did not enable him to foretell its progress in tandem with vulgar poetry. Neither Mencken nor the professional prophets could have foreseen that the evolution of jazz, blues, and swing would emerge as a distinctly American folk culture that would spread its influence to every corner of the planet.

Thus far we have seen that H. L. Mencken's attitude about poetry was not much different from that of other great writers. To conclude, I would like to submit that Mencken's indifference to poets was due to pride in his own skill as a poet. I do not refer to his youthful imitations of Kipling and Herrick, but to the mature essays that we still read with pleasure again and again. You say that Mencken was a prose writer?

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[22] THE YEARS IN POETRY: W.S. Braithwaite. 1917. In *The William Stanley Braithwaite Reader,* U. of Michigan Press, 1972.

[23] THE AMERICAN NOVEL: Prejudices: Fourth Series. Knopf, 1924.

I agree — but don't overlook the fact that he always warned friends and critics that *how* he wrote was more important than *what* he wrote. Consider the Mencken prose as blank verse: scrupulously crafted of condensed, lucid sentences, accented by *phrases in triplets,* contrast emphasized by the poetic ornaments of *alliteration, metaphor, antithesis, hyperbole, synecdoche.* Mencken the music lover composing sonatas in words: first stating the principle and subsidiary texts, which are elaborated and modulated from grave to gay through metaphor or homely phase — followed by an ironic, jocose scherzo accented with startling hyperbole — a restatement of the first theme followed by the second for effect of unity — then a short coda to compress the theme or mood. As with music and poetry the texture of the work is interwoven over the structure of unerring rhythm. This is the evidence that H. L. Mencken not only knew what poetry is but put that knowledge into daily practice. He forged a polished mellifluous art form, brilliantly orchestrated on the theme of current affairs and exhibited it daily to readers of the newspapers. It gained for him a wider readership than any poet since Longfellow.

"And to the mere sensuous joy in it, to the mere low delight in getting away from the world for a bit, there is added, if the poetry be good, something reaching out into the realm of the intelligent, to wit, appreciation of good workmanship."[24]

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[24] THE POET AND HIS ART: see #1.